

It Always Gets Stranger by thetasteofsunshine

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Summary:

Mike's family is going to Maine for the summer. Sometimes, things take a turn for the worst.

1. Chapter 1

MIKE Wheeler was looking forward to summer. What school-aged boy didn't? Sure it was only the beginning of May, but the air started getting warmer and he was just itching to do whatever he pleased for three months straight.

That is, until his mother dropped the bombshell.

It was the evening, and the Wheeler's were all sitting around the dining room table, eating a traditional American dinner together and acting like they were a perfect family in their perfect home. Karen Wheeler looked up from her plate of roasted ham and green beans to look at the two of her children that were sitting across from her and her husband, Ted Wheeler.

She cleared her throat loudly, and her children all looked up at her expectantly.

"Well, kids, I have an announcement to make!" Nancy Wheeler and Mike Wheeler exchanged a glance, as most of the time, these "announcements" meant that one of them did something bad and the both of them got in trouble for it. This glance was a silent conversation consisting of them arguing over who did something wrong. "No, no, it's not bad!" Karen added, and her face split into a grin before she said the words, "you're father and I have taken some time off, and we're going on vacation!"

"What? When?" Nancy asked. They hadn't been on vacation since Mike was seven, and that vacation consisted of them going to an amusement park in a nearby city for a weekend. "Taking time off," is what her mother had said, and Nancy hoped that meant that they were going somewhere for more than a week, hopefully filled with sunny skies and sand (it was no silent dream of hers to go to the beach, and she had hounded her parents every summer since she was ten to go, to no avail).

"Where? And for how long?" the boy next to her asked. He had many ideas prepared for a summer in Hawkins, and his friends had tagged along in the planning of sleepovers and bike ridings and a million

other things that they could do.

"Were going to visit my sister Maggie, up in Maine. For the *entire* summer!" Karen exclaimed. She had a large grin and it seemed to Mike that this was supposed to be good news.

"Seriously?" exclaimed Nancy in jubilation, at the same time as Mike's "Seriously?", which came out as shocked for the completely opposite reason of his sister's.

"Maine? Are you kidding me?" Truth be told, Mike was fine with Maine. He would be able to stand his cousins' nagging for two weeks at most (did he even have cousins? Mike had no idea.), but an entire summer? This would ruin every single plan that Mike had made for the three months of break.

"Yes, Michael! And I thought that telling you a month in advance would be okay for you!" See, Mike's mother was the only person that ever called him "Michael," and nobody else he knew would ever be caught dead saying that name.

"Well, it's not okay! Okay? My friends-"

"Mike, I don't see the problem," Nancy cut in. She would do anything to get out of this town, and with both of her friends working and looking for colleges, she was alone. An entire summer to meet new friends and to do new things sounded like heaven for the girl reaching the end of her third year of high school.

"How? How are you okay with this?" Mike argued back. "Just because your boyfriends are too busy being responsible adults instead of having sex with you-"

"*Michael!*"

"-and that if you would maybe get your head out of your ass and wonder what it's like having friends that don't want to screw you, you'd see the problem with this!" Mike stood up from his chair as Nancy did the same.

"You better apologize, son," Ted Wheeler spoke up. Mike was sure this was the first thing he'd said today. He hadn't even looked up

from the green beans on his fork.

“You know what? No! This all just a bunch of bullshit!” Mike stomped off, ignoring his mother calling him back and his sister calling him an asshole and his father calling out “language.” He stomped up to his room, where he slammed closed the door of his room loud enough so his family could hear it downstairs.

He was muttering words so fast not even he could understand, mixed in with strings of curses as he started pacing his room. When *that* got boring, he started writing and planning out a million different ways to thwart his mother’s plans, from making her break her leg falling down the stairs to mixing in honey (his mother was allergic to honey) into her morning coffee so she would have to go to the hospital and forget about this whole thing.

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The next morning, as it turns out, he didn’t do any of the one hundred and thirteen options on his list. He instead chose to ignore his mother entirely as he got ready for school, only acknowledging her as she told him to be safe while biking and to keep off the road when cars passed.

“I will, Mom,” he clipped, and headed out the back door into the garage, where his bike was kept.

He met up with Lucas Sinclair and Dustin Henderson on his way to school, and complained to them the entire time.

“And they said for the whole summer! *The whole summer!*” Mike whined to them for the third time as he shoved his bike in the bike rack at the front of the school.

“What’s for the whole summer?” a fiery-haired girl said as she skateboarded up to them. This was Max Mayfield, and her brother drove her to school every morning.

Lucas opened his mouth to speak. “Mike’s mom is-”

“My mom is making me go to Maine for the whole summer to visit her sister,” Mike butted in, and he re-started his rant as their other

friend, Will Byers, was dropped off in his mother's green Ford Pinto.

"It's crazy, isn't it!" Dustin added as they all started heading inside the school building. "What are we even gonna do without you? Your mom is the only one that allows all of us to sleep over, and none of us can ever be good DMs. Our summer is ruined!"

"Isn't that exaggerating a little?" Max wondered as she gripped her skateboard.

"Not really," Will said in his small voice. "That's kind of all we do during the summer."

"Unless..." Lucas started with a tone in his voice that meant he had an idea. At that moment the bell rang, signalling class.

"Unless what, Lucas?" Dustin asked as he jogged to keep up with Lucas's fast pace towards Biology.

"I'll tell you after class." And Lucas sped up, opening the door to Mr. Clarke's classroom to sit in the very front.

But in English, Lucas wasn't able to tell his idea to his friends either, nor in Spanish. In fact, it wasn't until lunch break that he was able to disclose his proposal.

"Okay so what if," Lucas started as he bit into his ham and cheese sandwich, "we all go with Mike to Maine?"

Everyone stared at him, some pondering the idea and some wondering if all of this sci-fi shit that was their lives was getting to him.

"What? Is there something on my face?" Lucas looked at them.

"No," Dustin said. "Well, yes, you do, but that's not what we meant." Lucas held still as Max grabbed a napkin and wiped the mayonnaise off of his cheek.

"It could work," Mike pointed out. "I mean, if we convinced our parents..."

Mike looked to his smallest friend, who was staring at his PB&J sullenly. It was very well known that after he'd gone missing in the "woods" a year and a half ago, his mother wouldn't let him out of her sight. It had only just become worse after the events that had happened in early November of last year.

Dustin placed a comforting hand on his friend's shoulder. "I know we can do it."

So it was settled.

2. Chapter 2

WHEN Lucas Sinclair got home that day, he was itching to ask his mother the burning question at the front of his mind. When he got off of his bike, his little sister, Erica, asked him if he had drinken a full pot of coffee at school. Lucas only glared at her as he headed to the living room and opened his backpack to grab his History homework.

“What are you so excited for, anyway?” Erica asked him as she picked up one of his pencils and started drawing on the corner of one of his homework pages.

“None of your business,” was Lucas’s reply, and he yanked the paper away from Erica.

“You ruined my flower!” she exclaimed, and Lucas elected to ignore her for the rest of the two hours until his mother would arrive home from work.

This proved harder than he thought, as it always did with Erica, and he ended up hiding away in his room to pretend she wasn’t there. Honestly, little sisters are so annoying, Lucas thought bitterly to himself as he glanced at the clock yet again.

After the excruciating time it took to get to five o’clock, Lucas practically ran to the front door as he heard it open and his mom called out, “I’m home!”

“Hey Mom, can I ask you something?” Lucas burst out as she was shrugging off her coat.

She wrinkled her brow as she walked into the kitchen, grabbing an apple and starting to slice it. “Sure honey, what is it?”

“I was wondering... well, would it be okay if I went to Maine for the summer?”

Mrs. Sinclair let out a chuckle. “Maine? Why do you want to go to Maine all of the sudden?” Mrs. Sinclair strictly remembered Lucas only last night gossiping about his plans with his friends for the

summer.

“Well, you see, Mike’s family is going to Maine for the entire summer,” Lucas started as he sat in one of the stools at the counter, “and he’s going to be alone the entire time. So we all had the idea of going with him.”

“Mmh, and does Mike’s parents know about this?” Mrs. Sinclair looked at her son expectantly, who looked away sheepishly.

“Well, we’re still planning this out. Mike only got the news last night, but he’s sure his parents will let him.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Well, let’s talk to your father first, and then we’ll get the okay from the Wheelers. How about that?”

Lucas’s face split into a grin. “Thanks, Mom!” He hopped off of his seat to hug her. He was almost taller than her now.

The Sinclair dinner went exactly as Lucas had planned, as Mr. Sinclair always agreed with his wife. The only setback was Erica complaining about “why can’t I go to Maine?” in a whiny voice that Lucas couldn’t stand. His mother chided her by reminding her that Lucas was three years older than her, and he stuck his tongue out at her when his mother’s back was turned.

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When Dustin got home that evening, his mother rushed up to him and asked how his day was, as always (she had Tuesdays off, as she worked a flexible job). The kitten Tews rubbed himself against Dustin’s schoolbag as he set it down.

“Well Mom, I had an idea,” he started as he walked into their living room “Well, it was actually Lucas’s but, well, what I’m trying to say is —”

“It’s not anything dangerous, is it Dusty? Because remember the bear that took—” she paused to blink back tears, “—that took Mews. I don’t want you getting mauled too.”

“No, Mom, it’s not anything dangerous but... Mike is going to Maine

with his family and... could I go with them? Lucas and my other friends will be there too!" He smiled. He knew his mother wasn't the biggest fan of the Wheeler's, mainly because of their political views, but she was very fond of Lucas.

"Well, if your friends will be there, and you'll stay safe," she emphasized those words, "then of course, honey." Dustin smiled a toothy smile, and he hugged his mother tight (who was easily half a foot shorter than him).

"Oh Mom, thank you, thank you, thank you! I'm gonna go buy Tews a cat toy after school tomorrow!"

"Oh, Dusty," Claudia smiled, "what would I do without you?"

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When the Party got to school the next day, everyone rejoiced over their luck. Max admitted that she had said a teensy, tiny lie, in that she had said that it was a summer camp and that her friend Jane would be there. (Jane had visited the Mayfield's/Hargrove's multiple times in the past, and Susan Hargrove loved her).

Mike had admitted that he promised his parents he'd get good grades, "So I need all the help I can get." (Mike had a D in Spanish and a C in Biology, and his parents weren't amused.)

They all excitedly waited for Will to come in his mom's car, but when he arrived, his shoulder were drooping and he was staring that same sullen look he had on at lunch the day before.

"Nope," he said in a defeated voice, and everyone sighed as they headed into class.

At lunch, Max asked Will to elaborate, in which he said, "I barely got the word out before she said no. I even mentioned it to Hopper, so El might even be able to go! It's just not fair."

The Party seemed to sigh in unison. They all knew Joyce meant well, but she could be overprotective at times.

"Well I for one am not giving up," Mike said in his stubborn way.

“We have to convince her. No party member gets left behind!”

Will smiled a small smile. “Thanks, guys.”

3. Chapter 3

“IS Max gonna be there, do you know?”

It was a Friday night, and, like all Fridays, it was movie night with Jim and El (or, as most people acknowledged her as, Jane). And, like always (at least since Tuesday), Will had asked to go with Mike for the summer.

“Yeah, her and everybody else. And the entire Wheeler family.” Will pointedly looked at his mother, even if it was El who was asking the question.

Hopper tilted his head in consideration. “And where in Maine did you say it was?”

“Derry. It’s this little town in the middle of nowhere, and Mike said there’s a lot of historical landmarks there,” Will explained, still looking at his mother. “If I went, it would be a great learning—”

“No.” Will slumped his shoulders. “I’m sorry honey, but you’ll be so far from home... I mean, what if you need me? What if you have another episode? What if something happens and I’m not there? The risk is just too great.”

“But I haven’t had an episode in six months, Mom. *Six!*”

“Yes, but what if that changes?”

Will just stared down at his turkey and mashed potatoes as Hopper talked with El about going to Maine.

Wow, Will thought, *the girl hiding from the government can go, but I can’t? That’s fair.*

Will loved his mom, really, he did. But she was so clingy, and nothing bad had happened to him in the six months since the “incident,” as everybody called it, Will had been perfectly fine. He hadn’t gotten a single episode. He hadn’t woken up screaming in four months, and (as far as his mother knew), his nightmares stopped completely. But here she was, treating him like he was made of glass, and the

smallest knick would kill him. He was getting tired of it, after a whole year and a half.

So he kept asking every day. Once during breakfast, once on the way to school, once on the way home from school, once when he got home, once when she helped him with his math homework, once when he was done with math homework, once before dinner, once during dinner, once after dinner, once before he took a shower, once after he took a shower, and finally, once before bed.

But, through his persistence of asking her eighty-four times a week, she still said no. Jonathan was about ready to ship his brother off to Maine just to shut him up, and Hopper wanted her to say yes as well because come on Joyce, we'll have both of our houses mostly to ourselves for the entire summer.

It was no secret that they were closer than friends.

And when Will's friends spent the night, and Joyce got forty eight more "can Will go to Maine?" questions than usual, she still persisted in saying "no." But, to Joyce's chagrin, they still didn't give up. Will made a list (by help of the Party) of a hundred reasons he should go with them. El took a more direct approach by hiding Joyce's keys on the top of the fridge until she said yes, but, after much convincing from Hopper, Joyce got her keys without agreeing to anything.

It was heading towards the end of May, and with just a few weeks left of school, the Party started panicking. They couldn't leave without their cleric. They just couldn't.

Joyce kept stubbornly saying no, and Will was slowly losing confidence in her ever saying yes. Mike even had his mother over for them to talk about it, and near the end, Joyce said, "I'll think about it," which gave Will new hope, but when he asked her later that night, she said her now familiar, strict, and firm "no."

"Come on Joyce," Hopper said one Friday, after El was in the car and Will was in bed, "the kid'll be so lonely if he has to stay here by himself the entire summer. It's not right for him. And besides, he'll be perfectly safe with the Wheelers. You heard Karen." He placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Let the kid just have fun."

So, after a month of asking, after five hundred and forty-two times of the Party's persistent questions, after five hundred and forty-two times of saying no, Joyce finally said yes.

She quietly knocked on Will's door, and after a "Yeah?" she went in and told him her change of heart.

"What, seriously?" Will asked, wondering if this was a hoax or not.

"Yes. I mean, you haven't visited Dr. Owens in months, and I guess if you don't go anywhere alone..."

Will sprang up and hugged his mom tight, saying "thank you" over and over as she laughed.

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The next day, Joyce and Will went over to the Wheelers, because going to over a thousand miles away needs some preparation. Mike practically cried when he heard, and he seemed almost more excited than Will was.

"And you're sure your sister is okay with this?" Joyce asked over a cup of coffee.

"Oh yeah, Maggie loves company," Karen assured her. "She was always the one to bring the entire town into our house; I don't understand how my mother put up with it." She smiled fondly at the memories.

They kept talking as Mike called the rest of the Party over on his super comm, and all of them were excitedly planning what they could do in Derry.

"I've been doing some research," Dustin said as he brought out a large book, "and apparently, there's twice the amount of deaths than the national average there. Just in that town! And there was a nightclub that got burned down in the sixties-"

"Oh joy," Max said sarcastically as she swiveled around in Mike's desk chair, "we're all going to die when we get there."

“Yeah, but that was in the sixties,” Mike pointed out. “And that’s, what, twenty years ago?”

“And apparently, there was this explosion on Easter one year...”

Dustin continued on with his spiel as everyone imagined what their summer would hold.

4. Chapter 4

THE day after the last day of school, the Party found themselves at the airport. It was a thirty minute drive there from Hawkins, and it was so early in the day that the sun was far from rising (four AM, to be exact). Will Byers was saying his final goodbyes to his mother in the lobby.

“You just *have* to make sure that you’re never alone, do you understand? Not even if you have to run down the street to get something, okay?”

“Yeah, Mom. I promise.” Joyce smiled at that and hugged her son one last time. Will jogged off to the check-in.

“Oh, and Will?” Will turned toward his mom. “I love you.”

He smiled. “Love you too, Mom! Bye! See you at the end of summer!”

Will managed to spot the right terminal, finding Dustin pouring over a book and Lucas passed out with his head on Max’s shoulder. Will decided to sit next to Mike, who was arguing with Nancy.

“No, I didn’t leave your Walkman at home, okay? Don’t you remember putting it in your bag?”

This was how it was until the flight was called, El showing up half an hour after Will. There were some people slowly trickling in and out, but the place stayed relatively quiet.

It finally reached six, and everyone was loaded onto the small airplane. Will and El were sitting next to each other, and throughout the flight, they counted how many lakes and rivers they passed by (there weren’t many).

Across the aisle, Dustin was sitting next to Nancy. Instead of stuck in his book (which was, coincidentally, about airplanes), he started telling Nancy what he knew.

“And the wheels, they retract and are pulled up into the plane to make it more aerodynamic.” Nancy nodded along, not a hundred

percent understanding what he said, but loving his enthusiasm.

Lucas, well, he had fallen right back asleep, the loudness of the airplane apparently not bothering him as he let out soft snores. Max was seated next to him, staring out the small window with her headphones over her ears, The world tuned out as she was deep in thought.

A couple rows down, Mike was seated next to Holly, who had woken up and decided to start singing the alphabet loud, off-key, and out of order.

“Holly, you’re almost five, you know that ‘P’ doesn’t come ‘L’,” he pointed out to the girl. She elected to ignore him as she kept singing, and Mike slumped down in his chair, trying to block out the obnoxious singing.

Ted and Karen were sitting closer to the front of the plane, and Ted was snoring quite louder than Lucas a few rows back. Karen had a romance novel in her hand and a glass of wine in the other (at this point it was seven AM, and the people around her were wondering if she was okay).

Around ten thirty, the plane touched down. Max elbowed Lucas in the side to wake him up, and El stared excitedly out the window as the huge machine steered to a stop.

Waiting by the baggage claim was a smiling couple, and, upon seeing each other, Karen and the woman ran to hug tightly. They were very close sisters, but with both of them living in different states, the last time they saw each other was when their boys were three (the two sisters had them around the same time).

As Mike retrieved his suitcase, he heard his aunt exclaim, “How are you?”

“I’m wonderful! How are *you*? ” Karen replied. Everyone was gathered ‘round now as the women started chatting away. Mike saw his dad stick a hand out to the man as they all started walking out of the building.

“Oh, and how’s your Richard? Where is he?”

“Oh, you know how boys are. He said something about sewers? He’s with his friends doing God knows what, but he said he’d be back before dinner.”

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When they got to the Tozier’s (two hours of a drive later), the girls were shown to a guest room and Ted and Karen were shown to another.

“Sorry boys, you guys have to sleep in with Richard in his room,” Wentworth Tozier explained to them, and they all threw their bags unceremoniously in the corner of the room.

“Your cousin’s not very clean,” Lucas commented as he peeked into the wardrobe where the boy obviously shoved all of his belongings into.

“Nice music taste though,” Will stated as he spotted a Bowie poster right next to one of Elton John.

“Yeah, I guess.” Mike was still pissed that he’d have to sleep on the floor for three months.

Tromping back downstairs, the boys went into the kitchen, where Maggie and Karen were preparing sandwiches.

“I’m just saying, Luke Skywalker would absolutely *vanquish* Smaug,” Mike argued. “What would a dragon do against the Force? Nothing!”

“Yeah, but he’s a talking dragon that, like, has the mind of a human. Plus, last time I checked, Luke Skywalker couldn’t breathe fire.”

“Yeah, and Smaug died! Luke Skywalker never dies!” Mike grinned as if he’d won the argument.

“But just saying...”

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Later that day, all of the kids went into the living room, where Max and El had brought out a board game.

“Monopoly?” Dustin sniffed. “Seriously?”

“It’s a good game, you dipshit,” Max glared.

“Do they have the wheelbarrow?” El queried, peering into the box. “I wanna be the wheelbarrow.”

Max handed her the metal piece as the others fought over different characters. She calmly grabbed the shoe and started dishing out colored money and setting up the board.

Half an hour later, as Dustin was gloating over owning Park Place, the front door slammed open, and a voice yelled into the house, “*SUP, FUCKERS!*” Lucas dropped the dice he was rolling as a boy with wild curly hair and a loud shirt stormed into the room.

He was an odd figure, with glasses framing his eyes, making them look three times the normal size. He was wearing a hawaiian shirt open over a t-shirt, and boardshorts. His shoes were covered in a strange sludge and *oh, what was that smell?*

The strangest thing about him though, was probably the fact that he looked exactly like Mike Wheeler.

“Oh, honey, you’re home!” Maggie skipped into the room, the smile not leaving her face. “This is your cousin and his friends!”

The boy scanned their faces as they looked at him. “Well, ‘ow ‘underful!” he cheered, his voice now a bad impersonation of a Scotsman. “Simply ravishing, if I do say so myself.” He turned to his mother. “When’s supper, Mam? I’m simply starved.”

Maggie smiled a smile that all moms do when they don’t understand their children, something Richie had gotten used to. “It’s in the oven right now. I bet you’ll have time to take a shower before then,

hmm?”

This was his mother’s way of telling him *you smell like the fucking sewers why were you in the sewers*. Richie took another glance at the strange kids in his living room and ran upstairs to his room so he could stop smelling like shit.

Meanwhile, the kids downstairs started talking at once.

“Did you see the way he looked-”

“He said the f-word in front of his parents-”

“He looked like Mike-”

“Guys-”

“What was up with that shirt-”

“He does *not* look like me, you assholes-”

“Why did he smell like sewage-”

“He cursed in front of his *parents*- ”

“But why was he wearing a hawaiian shirt if he’s miles away from the beach-”

“Guys-”

“Maybe he’s just trying to be original-”

“It’s called genes, you idiots-”

“Why does his hair-”

“Yeah, they’re cousins, but why do they look so similar-”

“ *GUYS!*”

They all turned their head toward the sound, where El was glaring.

“ *What?*”

“Lucas, it’s your turn to roll.” El motioned to the board, clearly not stopped up by the boy introduced to them. She nodded toward the dice, and Lucas picked them up as he rolled a seven.

5. Chapter 5

DINNER that evening was awkward between the kids, Eleven realized as she dug into casserole. She didn't mind at all the fact that the new boy had a loud mouth and didn't seem to sit still, nor that he looked very similar to the boy on her left.

Mike, she could tell, cared very much on the fact. So had no idea why, as the boy talked and talked and talked on about something interesting, Mike was glaring. He was stabbing his noodles with much ferocity, as if the boy, "Richard," is what his mom called him, was a disgrace to the world.

Dustin was chattering back to him, something about whales? El wasn't paying attention to the conversation.

And everybody else... they were just staring, hardly touching their plates. El knew they didn't *mean* to stare, by they kept glancing from Mike to his cousin, as if trying to find differences.

El didn't think they looked the same, as she picked up differences immediately as he stormed through the front door.

He had lighter hair, for one, a crazy curly mess much more different than Mike's controlled waves. His eyes were more golden than brown, and he had to be at least two inches shorter than Mike. He had a rounder, much more rosier face, and of course the prescription glasses that, without them, El guessed, he was as blind as a bat.

"What, never seen a face this hot before?" the boy asked when realizing that everyone was staring at him. So could practically *hear* Mike rolling his eyes next to her, or maybe it was the fed-up sigh that reverberated throughout his entire body.

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After dinner, everyone piled into the living room to watch a movie as "one big family," as Mrs. Wheeler called it.

“Or, as I call it, a two hour long argument over what movie we’re gonna watch until we all shut up and agree on a boring-ass documentary,” Richard muttered as he plopped down onto the couch El was seated on.

“Language!” Ted chided from the La-Z-Boy he was lounging on.

“Yeah whatever, Grandpa,” he grumbled. He leaned toward El and conspicuously whispered, “Are you *sure* he’s my uncle? Not like, great uncle, or maybe great great uncle? Because he’s fucking-”

“Richard! Be nice to our guests please,” his father called from the kitchen, as if he could sense his son being rude. Richie shrugged it off, kicking his legs against the side of the couch like a small child.

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Richie didn’t like guests. He didn’t like new people. And he *certainly* didn’t like new people who were guests in his home who were sleeping in his bedroom. It just messed up his whole summer, really.

Okay, maybe he was exaggerating. Maybe.

“So Micycle,” Richie said as he threw himself unceremoniously onto his bed. “How much were you paid to wear that sweater, huh? It’s fucking ugly.”

The boy glared at him before he looked back down at his opened suitcase, rifling through different pairs of pajama pants. “I’m not taking fashion advice from someone who wears hawaiian shirts unironically.”

“It’s called *originality*,” Richie explained, getting bored and grabbing the marker from his bedside table, connecting the freckles on his arm and creating new constellations on his skin.

“It’s called a disaster,” the black kid, Lucas was his name? said as he stepped into the room, clad in a set of Star Wars pajamas and plopping down onto the bedroll near the foot of Richie’s bed.

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The next morning, Mike crawled out of bed only for some of the best words his mom had said in a while: “Boys! Pancakes!”

When he got downstairs, he found his aunt cutting up apples as his mother was standing at the stove, pouring batter onto a hot grill next to a pile of steaming flapjacks. Upon seeing her son she smiled, and asked how well he slept.

“Good,” he said plainly. *If “good” is a synonym to “my back is aching in three spots,” then yes mom, it was “good.”*

Dustin was already sitting at the table, chatting to Richie about some movie.

“Yeah, and so there’s this alien spaceship, see, and there’s this cat...” he elaborated as he shoved a large bite of pancake into his mouth. Mike grabbed a plate and sat as far away from Richie as possible, though it didn’t stop him from hearing the conversation.

“Wait, so they used the fucking alien cat to win bets so they can get the spaceship back?” Richie asked, enraptured as a piece of bacon fell from his hand.

“Yeah! And then there’s this helicopter...”

Mike tuned them out as he ate his breakfast, and Will joined him soon after, his hair a ratty mess. Mike had the urge to fix it.

He shook his head, as if to rid the thought away.

“Richard dear,” Maggie said as she walked over and placed a piece of bacon on everybody’s plates (except for Will, who, like Max, had become a vegetarian), “I was wondering if you would like to take your new friends out and explore the town. I bet they’d love it.”

Richie’s smile fell. “But Mom,” he whined, “I’m supposed to go to the quarry later today with *my* friends!”

“Well honey, that’s fine! I bet your friends would *love* Mike and his!”

Mike rolled his eyes. Any friends of Richie Tozier would have to be psychotic, or maybe certifiably insane. Mike did *not* want to be associated with anything Richie Tozier liked. But their moms beamed as if it was the best idea in the world, and Mike knew his mother would do *anything* to get what she wants.

So it was settled.

Notes for the Chapter:

sorry if this chapter is shit i didn't know what to write.

follow me on tumblr @mi-cycle-wheeler

6. Chapter 6

BEN Hanscom was a patient person. If anyone was to describe him, that was the word to use.

But when his yearlong friend, Richie Tozier, showed up at the quarry an entire hour late with six more people than expected, Ben's patience was being tested.

"What the hell, Richie?" was Eddie Kaspbrak's greeting to the boy, and he smiled sarcastically, showing off his slightly over-large incisors.

"Well ya see Eds, I was busy sayin' goodbye to your mom and I lost track of the time—"

"Beep beep, Richie," Eddie and his group of friends chorused, used to the antics of their trashmouth friend.

"What's with the entourage?" Stan asked from his spot on a nearby rock, which he had taken to sitting on for the last half hour of waiting. The group of silent kids behind Richie shuffled, and Ben watched as a kid with wildly curly hair exchanged glances with a tall black boy.

Said boy spoke up, seeming to take leadership. "We're friends of Mike, Richie's cousin." The boy motioned to another, who looked very much like Richie.

"Well, friends and cousins of Richie, welcome!" Beverly said from next to Bill, flashing a smile toward them. A couple of the strangers reciprocated, the curly haired kid and a girl with brown hair just as wild.

The air fell silent after that as everyone yook in the faces of new, and Ben did as well. There was also a girl with vivid red hair that could rival Bev's, the long tresses pulled back into a ponytail. Next to the boy who looked like Richie (*Mike*, Ben was proud to remember) stood a kid with round eyes and a wary smile, his hair framing his face in a flattering way. A bird chirped and Stan's head turned to the

sound.

Surprisingly, Bill was the person to break the awkward silence. He motioned to the redhead's shirt and asked, "Y-you like Eh-Eh-Elvis?"

She seemed to ignore his obvious stutter. "Yeah, I love him. You too?"

"Oh, I can never st-s-stop listening to h-h-hi-him! The Losers ah-are always ann-an-annoyed at me," He beamed. "Oh, and I d-d-do-don't buh-buh-believe I caught your name." She opened her mouth to speak as the curly kid beat her to it.

"She's Max. I'm Dustin. And did you just call your friends 'losers?'" Ben noted that some of his teeth seemed to be missing, and he had a slight lisp.

"It's what we call ourselves," Ben spoke up, and he felt slightly uncomfortable with so many new pairs of eyes focused on him. "The bullies called us 'Losers,' so we took the name as our own."

"Original," Max spoke up. "Our bullies just call us—"

Richie cleared his throat loudly, not in a way to get something out of it, but to draw attention to himself. "Uh, hello? Less chatty-chatty, more swimmy-swimmy? Come on fuckers, we're losing daylight!" Richie strode over to the side of the cliff before anyone could point out to him that they had hours to swim.

"Wait, you're gonna jump *off of* that ? " Mike spoke up, a shake to his voice. He exchanged glances with Dustin and the unnamed girl, and Ben sensed that they had a story to tell from it.

"What's wrong, Micycle, 'fraid of heights?" Then he said quieter, "If he shits himself, it'll be hilarious."

"No, I'm not! I just... um... it's a long story," Mike defended himself.

"Probably about the diving board to the public pool, amiright?"

"Shut up, Richie. Not the time." Eddie rolled his eyes.

Bill put a reassuring touch to Mike's arm. "Do-don't worry, Muh-Mih-Mike, we've all done it be-before. It's perfectly safe."

"But—"

"It'll be fine, Mike. See? Watch." Max pushed past Richie and took a large leap into the water. Everyone ran to watch her fall, and she let out a "Woo!" as she disrupted the water with a satisfyingly large splash.

"*Holy shit!*" Richie exclaimed. "That was really hot. Is she single?" Richie cringed away as Lucas punched him in the arm. The unnamed girl shook her head and jumped after Max. "Holy shit, is *she* single?"

"Beep-fucking-beep, asshole."

"Aw, come on, Eds. I'm just asking a question you all know you wanted answered."

Stan shook his head, the curls bouncing along. "Weren't you hung up on Eddie's mother ten minutes ago?"

"The past is in the past, Stan-the-Man."

Ben looked at the others. "Wanna jump?"

Dustin grinned, his cheeks pulled up and his eyes crinkling. "Thought you'd never ask."

Everyone's feet left rock and flew through the air into the water, multiple cries of "Holy shit!" and "Woo-hoo!" being shouted into the air.

Ben did a head count, and, coming up two short, he looked back up at the cliff.

Two tiny figures stood, and Ben could see the dark hair and pale skin even from a height like that.

Richie and Mike seemed to be arguing, hands waving and voices carrying down the cliff, although Ben couldn't decipher what they were saying. Ben saw hands connect a chest, and one of them came

flailing down the cliff with a strangled “ *I’M GONNA KILL YOU, RICHARD!*” The second figure followed, and Max gargled on water as she let out a laugh when Mike hit the water.

...

Lots of water-splashing and chicken-fighting ensued after that, and the twelve kids took to lounging on the rocks as they dried off and music from Richie’s boombox filled the air.

“So... what brings you guys to Derry?”

Stan had known about Richie’s family situation, as he had complained to them over and over since he’d gotten the news. He (and the rest of the Losers) had no idea as to *why* they had come.

“My mom,” Mike had spoken up. “She wanted to visit her sister and my entire family was dragged along.”

“Yeah, and we didn’t want him to be alone all summer,” Lucas elaborated.

“Sorry Rich,” Bev turned to the boy with magnified eyes, “if you have to leave for the summer, we’re ditching you.” Richie glared and everyone cracked a smile.

The air fell silent again, save the boombox blasting one of Richie’s many mixtapes.

“Is it true that Derry has twice the average amount of deaths than the national average?” Dustin burst out randomly, as if he was waiting to pop the question all day. The losers’ heads turned to Ben, knowing he was the library nerd out of all of them.

“No, actually. It’s six times.” Dustin’s eyes widened, like a little kid that got what they wanted for Christmas.

“Totally tubular,” he smiled at Lucas and Max, although nobody else seemed to get the joke.

...

On the walk back, Eddie has a feeling of something being... *off* . When he asked Bev, she just shrugged, saying, "You always feel like something's off, Ed. I bet it's nothing," and she pushed his shoulder in a sisterly manner. He continued walking.

"She really think she's gonna come outta that school?" Eddie turned at Stan's voice, his gaze fixed on a lone woman sitting on the steps of the empty school, hopping up peeking through the doors as if waiting for someone who was late.

"What? Who's 'she?'" the short boy, Eddie learned who was named Will, wondered.

"Betty Ripsom," Beverly said to him. "She went missing a few weeks ago. That's her mom over there."

"It's as if she's been locked in a janitor's closet for the last few weeks," Eddie muttered, looking at the mother who was hiding on to a nonexistent thread of hope that her daughter was lost at school, that's all. She's fine, she's safe.

"Do you think they're actually gonna find her?" Stan spoke aloud to the silent group.

"Sure," Richie started, and Eddie prepared himself for an offensive comment. "In a ditch, all decomposed, covered in worms and maggots and smelling like Eddie's mom's underwear." Richie motioned to Eddie, who shivered at the idea.

"Shut up, this is freaking disgusting." Eddie shook his head to rid himself of the image, filled with millions of deadly bacteria.

"She's not dead, she's mm-meh-missing," Bill said defensively, glaring at the bespectacled boy.

"Sorry, Bill," Richie apologized, his extra-large eyes seeming to come into focus as he adjusted his glasses. "She's missing."

Eddie was surprised. The only other times he'd heard Richie apologize was once to the principal for selling candy from his locker (after his mother forced him to), and once to a streetlight that he thought was a person after he ran into it. It was a thing of Richie's: he just didn't apologize to things because he usually didn't feel sorry.

But of course, Bill was always sort of treated a little like glass since what happened in October... Eddie still remembered the phone call and how Bill had to hand the phone to his mother because he was stuttering so badly.

"They'll find her," the curly-haired girl said, and Eddie was startled to realize this was the first time he'd heard her speak. She had a soft voice, and it reminded Eddie of a warm cabin in the woods that he had never been to before. She spoke with a sort of certainty to her voice that made it sound like she knew Betty personally, and had seen her. It was quite calming.

"Should we tell her about the shoe?" Ben was still staring at the mother, who glanced at the group before turning back to the school.

"What shoe? Did you guys find something?" Lucas asked, furrowing his eyebrows.

"W-we were in the ss-sew-sewers yesterday," Bill explained. "Looking f-for..." he took a deep breath, "no one."

"'Looking for no one.' Wow, that's not sinister sounding at all." The redheaded Max shook her head as Lucas nudged her in the arm. She sighed. "Sorry."

"Is that how you guys spend your summers?" Dustin asked, crunching down a granola bar that Eddie didn't know how he got. "Inside of sewers?"

Richie was silent for a heartbeat before, "Beats spending it inside of your mother. Ohhh." He raised his arm for a high-five to Stan, who grabbed it and yanked it down.

"Woah," Mike said, looking at something Eddie couldn't see, "Nice car."

They all turned, spotting a blue Trans Am, and Eddie's face paled. "W-we should get outta here."

"Why, Kaspbrak?" a sneering voice spoke. "Fraid you'll go missing too?" Eddie turned around, spotting Henry Bowers standing just a few feet in front of the group. How he managed to sneak up on them, Eddie had *no* idea, and he sometimes wondered if he had the ability to teleport.

Riche let out a choking sound as the back of his shirt was yanked backwards, and he fell spectacularly into Stan, where they both landed on the ground with an almighty "oof."

A large belch sounded right next to Eddie's ear, and he cringed away from the sound and the hot breath, gagging as the boy, Belch Huggins, let out a big laugh.

"Knew he was a bottom," Patrick said as Richie tried to get up off of Stan, and Victor Criss, another one of Henry's goons, pushed him back down. Patrick kicked Stan in the arm. "Fuckin' flamer!"

"And who have we here?" Henry said, looking toward Lucas, who had a scowl set on his face. Eddie wouldn't put it past him that he would punch Henry if he had the chance. "You seem far from home, dontcha, Midnight?"

"Eat shit."

"Oh, you think you're all high 'n' mighty, don't ya?" Henry said in that menacing voice of his. "Newsflash, kid: you don't belong here. Stay out of this town. Or you'll deserve what's comin' for ya."

"Hmm, what else've we got here?" Victor seemed to have snuck up behind Max, and he had a handful of her hair in his fingers. She yanked herself away from him, turning around and stepping on his toes.

"Leave her alone!" Dustin said angrily. Henry's gaze turned to him, and Dustin's bravery seemed to melt.

"You seem to be missin' a couple 'a teeth there, Curly. Shut up if you don't want to lose some more."

“Ss-sss-sshut it, Bowers!” Bill said angrily, his mouth seeming to not agree with his words as he spit them out. Henry turned around slowly, that threatening look back in his eyes.

“You suh-suh-say somethin’, Buh-Buh-Buh-Billy?” he strode over to the boy until they were inches apart. “Yeh got a free ride this year ‘cause ‘a your little brother. Ride’s over, Denbrough.”

Eddie knew he was going to do something horrible like he always did, but a police cruiser had rode down the street, slowing down while going by the kids. *His father*, Eddie thought to himself.

“This summer’s gonna be a hurt train. For you and your faggot friends.” He walked away and toward Belch Huggins’ car, but not before licking his hand and wiping it on Bill’s face.

The kids all watched them ride off.

“Wish he’d go missing,” Richie commented.

“He’s probably the one doing it,” Eddie said thoughtfully.

7. Chapter 7

DUSTIN was walking near the back of the group, eating his second granola bar that he nabbed from Mrs. Tozier's pantry. The two Williams were standing in front of him, talking about "angles" and "shading" and something called "foreshortening." He wasn't really paying attention until a loud crash made him almost drop his granola bar, which would be something sad indeed.

"What the hell, Richie?" Mike's annoyed voice was berating him. It seemed he had purposefully knocked over a trash can, or something of the sort, and Dustin rushed forward to see the carnage before something else caught his eye.

A red balloon seemed to be floating perfectly in midair, down a dark alley between the post office and the hair salon. "What the hell..." Dustin said as he took a step toward the balloon, almost as if he was drawn to it. With every step he took, the balloon drifted further away, until he was at the end of the alley and his fingers were touching the red rubber.

"It's gotta be the wind or something," he muttered to himself. "Or maybe a magnet..."

He was startled out of his thoughts as a low growl sounded behind him, one he hadn't heard since almost a year ago. Wheeling around, a doglike creature was standing in front of him, looking like a slimy lizard. It had scales, but also had a tulip-like face that opened up to show rows and rows of drooling teeth. There were yellow spots decorating its rear. Dustin couldn't believe it.

"D'art?" The creature got in the position to pounce, letting out that low growl again. Dustin smiled. "It's okay buddy, it's me, Dustin." He held up his half-eaten granola bar. "You hungry?" He set down the bar in front of the demodog, but D'art just growled some more. "Sorry bud, don't have any nougat with me." Dustin gulped, and it wormed into his head that *that is a live demodog trapping you in an alley. You're screwed.*

But food had worked then. Dustin didn't know what to do now.

“D’art?” Dustin’s voice was barely a whisper, and it cracked on the “a.” The demodog’s hind legs tensed, and Dustin, with a split-second realization, ducked just as the creature pounced. He ran, faster than he had at the quarry, faster than he ever had in his life. The sound of clawed feet hitting the pavement was all that filled his ears as he burst out of the alley and into the sunlight.

The sound of the dog receded, but Dustin kept running, turning around only when he reached the end of the block.

Looking back, a clown stood at the mouth of the alley, an impossibly wide grin seen from so far away. It was holding a red balloon.

“Hey there, Dusty,” It said in an exuberant voice, like that of a regular circus clown. “Don’tcha wanna know how I make it float?” It tilted its head toward the balloon. “I can make *you* float if you want. I can make us *all* float.” The clown’s smile was somehow preserved when it talked, blood red lines like clown makeup painted across its stark white face.

Dustin jumped about three feet when something touched his arm, and he turned and accidentally smacked Lucas in the face.

“Ow!”

“Sorry, Lucas.” Dustin turned to look down the street again, finding nothing out of the ordinary except for a stray cat cleaning itself.

“Don’t disappear like that next time.” Lucas took in Dustin’s pale face, looking as if he had seen a ghost. “Woah, you okay?”

“Party meeting. As *soon* as possible.”

...

“Bill said he draws too, and when we meet up again, he said he’ll bring his sketchbook,” Will ranted. “He said he mainly works in colored pencils. He even told me he could teach me! Isn’t that amazing, guys?”

The party (and Richie) were currently lounging in the Tozier's basement, also known as the informal TV room. Currently, nothing was playing on the TV, but the kids were seated in assorted comfort, from lawn chairs to a futon.

"I thought you knew how to draw already." Lucas pointed out from a stool.

"Yeah, but that's just crayon and pastels. I've never really learned how to work with colored pencils before," Will continued. "He also said his mom has a ton of markers, and he's gonna ask if we can use them."

Richie scowled. It wasn't that he wasn't happy for the two Williams. Hell, Richie hadn't seen Bill that expressive since October, but Richie felt put off. He didn't know why. He glanced to his right, finding his cousin with a similar expression.

"Let me join you," Jane said from her position on a table. Richie didn't know why she was on the table, especially when there was a perfectly good bean bag chair right next to it. She had her hand in a bowl of chips and was refusing to let Lucas, who was trying to sneak a handful, get any, slapping his hand away whenever he got too close.

"Hey, what's wrong with Bill, anyway?" Max asked, twirling around in a swivel chair. "He seemed a little, I dunno, *subdued*." Six pairs of eyes honed on Richie. His throat went dry.

"Uh, well, ya see..." Richie scratched the back of his neck. "His little brother went sorta, um, missing?" the sentence came out sounding more like a question, "and it was back in October and he still hasn't been found."

"October?" Will's eyes widened, but Richie didn't have the chance to repeat himself before Mike spoke up.

"And you made a joke about that missing girl? Bethany or whoever? What a dick move." He crossed his arms and leaned back, and Richie lowered his head in shame, cheeks flushing in embarrassment. The room fell quiet after that, though loud with everyone's wandering

thoughts.

"You okay, Dustin?" Lucas turned to the boy on his right, who was strangely silent. "You've been silent since the quarry. Everything all good?"

Dustin still stared straight ahead, as if nobody had spoken in the first place. Jane threw a chip at him, and he jumped, looking around in a panic. Lucas shoved the chip into his mouth as Dustin shook his head. "What? Oh, right." He looked up, seeming more serious than Richie had ever seen him, even if they had met yesterday. "Um, we need a party meeting. *Now*. "

Everyone stayed silent as they turned to Richie, who gulped. "Oh. Right." He stood up and walked out, closing the door harder than he needed to. *Kicked out of my own basement*, he thought bitterly. And for that, instead of going to his room like he should've, he pressed his ear against the door to listen in.

"--not like last time?" Mike, Richie thinks, was saying. "Because if it was--"

"But how?" Lucas asked. "El closed the gate. Right?" Uncertainty wavered in his voice, and Richie vaguely wondered who El was.

"Yes." This was Jane and Will in unison. The next voice was just Jane. "I would know if it wasn't." She said it with such clarity in her voice that Richie would be scared to contradict her.

"But then what did I see?" Dustin said, and Richie heard feet start pacing. He knew it was Mike, somehow. Maybe it was a cousin thing. "I'm not hallucinating guys, that was a demodog I saw!"

"And a floating balloon?" Max asked. "And a clown?" Richie violently shuddered. He hated clowns, with their frizzy hair and painted grins that were too wide to be natural. He remembered the glass clown statue that Bev used to have, the one that he "accidentally" broke by hitting it violently with a dictionary. He smiled fondly at the memory, then got back to his task of obnoxiously eavesdropping.

--need to call Hopper," Will was saying. "He needs to know what's going on."

"No!"

"But El--"

"This is my first time out of that fucking town," Jane was ranting, "I'm not letting some stupid hallucination demodog get in the way of--"

"I know what I saw!"

"Dustin, we're not saying you didn't!" Max cried, and Richie pictured her wild hair swishing as she yelled. "I'm just saying, if we tell Hop we're *all* going home."

The room fell silent, and the pacing stopped too. Richie counted for a minute before someone finally spoke up.

"Guys," Mike said in a heartbreaking voice that Richie would never believe to come out of the arrogant boy's mouth. "Guys, I don't want to be alone."

"And you won't be," Will reassured him, and Richie pictured him placing a comforting hand on Mike's shoulder. "Either we all go or none of us do. And I hate to agree with El but..." he let out a heavy sigh, and Richie imagined him looking from Jane to Mike, "we have no choice. We stay."

"Without our parents," Jane sighed.

"Dustin, are you *sure* it was D'art? Richie imagined Lucas giving a dark stare. "Because the Mind Flayer's not coming back."

"It can't," Will said with finality. It was as if the group let out a collective breath of air, and Richie realized from the creak of wood that someone was climbing the basement steps. Richie ran upstairs as fast as he could, and when the boys burst into his room, he tried to pretend that he had been laying there the whole time.

That night, he dreamed of dogs and lizards and a faceless person

named El. He woke up with more questions than he knew how to answer.

Notes for the Chapter:

and thus, our first encounter with IT (that we know of) DUN DUN DUNNNNNNNNN!!! or maybe it's the mind flayer!?!?!!

8. Chapter 8

MIKE was scared out of his mind. Demodogs don't just pop up out of nowhere in the middle of Maine, and they especially don't float balloons and turn into clowns.

Mike still had this stewing in his mind as he laid in his sleeping bag that night, staring at the ceiling with little planet stickers stuck to it. Pretty soon, thoughts mixed into dreams, and unluckily for Mike, dreams always seemed way more realistic.

Mike typically had dreams, especially bad ones, after the incidents from the previous two Novembers. It was as if his mind was still stuck in those terrifying weeks, brewing on past events that his unconscious had taken custody of.

This one was his most haunting one, of course. Maybe his thoughts had zeroed in on *demodogs*, and his mind had acted accordingly.

He was standing in a locked room, horrible noises sounding from behind the wooden door, shrieks of pain and the cries of monsters echoing down the expansive hallways. Now, that's bad enough, hearing pain and torture and creatures feeding, but the wall was filled with cameras of the entire building, and Mike winced as he watched one of the demodogs rip into a soldier, and he tore his eyes away from the gruesome image.

This then led his line of sight to the boy laid casually on the table, looking like he was sleeping peacefully, like he wasn't screaming five minutes before, like he wasn't possessed by a horrifying monster, worse than a million demodogs.

Bob and Hopper were talking about basic, and Mike found his lips moving around the words.

"It's a computer programming system," he had said, although he didn't remember if those were the exact words he said. He watched as Bob walked out of the room, into the Labyrinth of haunting horrors, and Mike shut his eyes and tried to tune everything out.

He knew what happened next, and he hated it. He hated it beyond the word hate, he hated seeing this same scene, over and over in his mind. He hated the yelling, the screaming, the snarl and roar of the dogs, he hated the pound of claws on thick glass and he hated that one second of dread that seemed to last a lifetime where he thought that he wouldn't make it. That Hop and Joyce and Will and Mike would be on the ground, torn to shreds like the man inside, blood spilling out of their bodies, creatures clawing at their ribs and faces like some demented flower, exposing rows and rows of teeth lowering down on their abdomens—

Mike's eyes snapped open, gasps of breath escaping his lungs as if he had run a mile. He sat up, his eyes scanning the room. His heart rate slowed as he scanned over the faces of his sleeping friends, peacefully snoring away.

He let out a sigh of relief and layed back down, although it was much longer before sleep took him again. He didn't dream again that night.

...

The next morning, Lucas crawled out of bed to find Dustin pulling on his shoes, a backpack slung over his shoulder.

"What are you doing?" Lucas asked groggily, still half asleep. "It's like eight AM."

Dustin glanced at his watch. "It's noon, you idiot. I'm going to the library. Ben told me he'll show me all of the books when we were at the quarry yesterday."

Lucas rubbed the sleep out of his eyes as Dustin proceeded to finish putting his left shoe on and walk out the door. He walked over to Max, who was watching Will draw a dragon.

"You think he's okay?" he asked, his eyes darting to the door where Dustin once stood. They'd never seen him act like this, even when he was horribly lying about the demodog that ate his cat.

"I don't know," Max admitted. "And honestly, I don't—"

“What do you mean ‘Bowie’s better than Elton John?’” They all jumped as they heard Mike yell from the kitchen. “Give me *one* song that David Bowie has made that’s better than Elton John!”

Will sighed, setting his pencil down on his sketchbook and dropping it on the couch. “I’ll be right back.” He padded into the kitchen, and Max and Lucas watched him leave. His voice floated into the living room. “Why don’t we all agree that they’re both great artists?”

“Because this *fucking idiot* is saying that Elton John could be better than David Bowie!”

“Because he is! Right, Will?”

“Umm...”

They heard Mike dramatically gasp. “You *traitor!* ” Lucas and Max covered their mouths to stifle their laughter, a feat that they epically failed at as Will spluttered, trying to defend himself.

...

Ben was in the library, thumbing through a thick book, when Dustin’s watch beeped.

“Oh shit, it’s already five. I told my friends I’d be back by now.”

“Oh, okay,” Ben looked up as the boy walked out of the library, a gust of air filling the room, blasting his blond hair out of his face. He kept staring where the wild-haired boy used to stand, the books he was looking at still lying open on the table.

He was startled out of his trance as a heavy book slammed next to him. He looked around the room, only an elderly woman and a tall black boy scanning through the shelves.

“Here’s that book you asked for,” the librarian said, her hand still placed on the front of the thick book. Ben reached for it, but apparently she wasn’t done talking. “Where’d that other boy go? He was nice.” Ben stayed silent. “Boy your age, you should be outside.

It's summer. Don't you have any friends?"

"Can I just have the book please?" The librarian fixed her glasses and walked off, letting out a snippy little "hmpf." The truth was, none of Ben's other friends liked reading, so he typically spent his hours in the library alone. He liked it that way anyway, because how would he be able to read with the loud chatter that his friends always had floating around with them?

He pulled the book closer to him, its gold pressed title shining bright against the blue bindings. *A History of Old Derry*, it read as he turned to the center of the book.

He flipped through the shiny pages, covered in black and white photographs with captions. One picture of huge chopped-down trees was captioned *Sawmill worker at the FAA cooperative sawmill*.

He kept turning pages until one specific one caught his eye. *Easter Egg Hunt celebration at the Derry Iron Works, 1908*. The picture displayed what looked like a performance of sorts, a box with a smiling clown face on the side of it, a dancing clown said to be inside. The picture on the next page showing kids lined up with their find, easter eggs clutched in hands and resting in baskets.

Ben was surprised when the next picture was of a newspaper clipping, the haunting title stating *EASTER EXPLOSION KILLS 88 CHILDREN, 102 TOTAL*. On the next page showed bodies on the ground, looking too small. Ben sucked in a breath, his lungs feeling tight against his rib cage.

The next page was even worse. *A gruesome discovery in the wake of the Derry Iron Works explosion, 1908*, a picture, showing crowded around under a twisted tree. Ben turned the page, not wanting to see what was in the tree.

But strangely, the next page was the same picture. It was zoomed in closer to what was in the tree. He kept turning the page, two times more, three, eight times more but it was still the picture. Ben had a gross twisting feeling in his gut as he realized what was in the tree.

Turning the page one last time, he closed the book with a loud *slam*

as he laid his eyes on the photograph.

A severed head lay between the fork of a branch, the boy looking no older than ten years old. If it wasn't for the blood covering his face and the lack of a body, he could have looked as if he were sleeping. Ben's breathing was heavy, and he faintly registered the sound of a door closing as the black boy left.

His eyes turned to the newspaper lying next to the other books, today's paper. *Body found by canal, not Betty Ripsom*. Ben closed his eyes and tries to swallow down the feeling of needing to puke.

His heartbeat sped up rapidly by the sound of a little girl's laughter, and music, that of which that would come from a jewelry box with a ballerina dancing in it, sounded from behind him. It seemed off key, like a beat too slow, and he turned around.

Floating there, as if pulled along by an invisible force, a bright red balloon drifted in the air, not unlike one that you would find in the circus. It drifted into an open doorway, the music tinkling quietly, as if to say *come, follow me, you need me* . As if he himself was pulled magnetically to the sound, Ben got up out of his chair and followed it into a narrow hallway, filled with boxes.

Perched on the top of the three steps up sat an egg. But not just any egg, no, an *Easter* egg, its colorful painting saying *congratulations, you found me!* Ben walked over to it. The back of it was charred, and it was still smoking slightly. *As if escaping an explosion*. Ben shuddered at the thought.

He looked up, and there, sitting at the end of the hallway, perfectly upright, was another egg. And just down that room, another one! Ben kept following them, down a staircase and then down another. *Maybe they're showing me something*, Ben thought excitedly, and he ran down a staircase to get to another.

Now, Ben wasn't a superstitious kid to say the least. He didn't believe in ghosts, or demons, or omens. He didn't even believe in Santa, not even when he was an innocent little five year-old full of wonder. But he followed the eggs, as if they had little voices speaking to him, saying in cheerful tones *follow me! Right this way! Come on, you're*

almost there!

The final egg was in the basement, matching the others in its brightly colored-ness and the charred bits. Ben picked it up and looked around, as if to expect someone to pop out and announce he'd won a million dollars.

But no, there was only Ben and some boxes.

The lights flickered, and Ben walked forward as the sound of children's laughter seemed to come from another aisle of boxes. He thought he saw movement as the lights turned off completely, the only light that of which shining from the large window on the landing and the buzzing exit sign above the doorway.

The sound of feet tromping down stairs was heard, and Ben went to move behind a post, thinking, *This is it! This must be what the eggs were leading me to.* He waited with bated breath as shoes appeared down the stairway, old-fashioned looking and worn.

Ankles twisted as the child kept stumbling down the stairs, a handful of eggs clutched in its arms. Its shoulder were visible, and then its neck, and then... *nothing*. Ben felt his mouth get dry as the headless child's eggs fell from its arms as it reached the basement floor. It topped for a second, and, as if it had eyes, turned its head toward Ben, who was still clumsily hiding behind a support post.

Then, impossibly fast, it rushed forward towards Ben, and he stumbled backwards.

Ben was never the fastest kid, and his breathing grew heavier as he heard the sound of footsteps getting closer.

He looked behind him, and the sight made him run faster, down an aisle and up another, overturning boxes and tripping over his own shoes. The child kept advancing, its arms twisted grotesquely and movements jerky, the neck smoking as it moved along like a puppet on strings.

"Eggboy!" a voice called, gruff and garbled. Ben turned to look where the voice came from, almost stopping to see. A creature rushed out

from behind the aisle of boxes, a frilly collar with a clown's head resting on top of it, blood red lips and lines leading up its face, eyes rolled back into its head.

Ben almost screamed as he ran into someone, but upon seeing that it was only the librarian, he felt himself exhale.

"What on earth are you doing?" she demanded, but Ben was still looking around the room, searching for headless children and/or clowns. "You're not allowed down here, you *do* know that, Mister Hanscom!" Upon seeing nothing, Ben rushed wordlessly past the aging woman, stepping up the stairs two at a time and welcoming in the sunlight.

9. Chapter 9

MIKE was hot.

This didn't mean that he was more attractive than the average male, and Mike thought he was not nearly so, but he was sweating and he didn't like it.

It was maybe a week after going to the quarry, and since then, his mother (thankfully) didn't make him tag along with Richie and his friends. The Party, however, seemed to love the Losers' club, and there wasn't a day when Dustin didn't have Ben over, and not a single moment in which Will was not out with Bill.

It was in fact one of these times when Mike was laying on the couch, doing absolutely nothing. Well, he was breathing, and blinking, and he was swinging his legs, but other than that, it seemed that Mike could have been on that couch for centuries, staring at the ceiling with his hair fanned around his face like a dark mane.

He was alone in the house, everyone else outside showing off skateboarding moves and flipping hamburgers and wearing overlarge sunhats. There was no particular reason why Mike wasn't outside. Maybe he just missed complete silence, or maybe he just needed time alone. Or maybe he was just confused as to why anyone would be outside in this heat.

He was startled out of his mind-palace when the front door opened, and the silence was shot with the sound of loud boys talking boisterously.

"Y-y-you got him good, Byers."

"Me? Look at me, my nose is dripping. You really got him! Your knuckles are bleeding."

"I duh-duh-don't know if that's his blood or m-muh-mine."

Mike sat up, finding two Williams standing in the doorway, covered in blood and smiles.

“What the hell happened?” Mike demanded, and the boys jerked their heads as if they didn't realize Mike was in the room.

“Oh, uh, we ran into Henry Bowers, and uh...” Will trailed off, motioning to his bloody nose and bruised cheek. He seemed to be blushing, although that might've also just been the blood on his face.

“I know where the bandages ah-are,” Bill spoke up. He grabbed Will's arm and led him to the kitchen, Will sitting on the counter as Bill opened a cupboard bursting with band-aids and bandages.

“I'll just... go... I guess.” Mike turned toward the stairs, heading to his suitcase and thinking maybe I'll just grab a comic or something. There's no way I'm going downstairs and seeing those two looking at each other like that. He could still hear them downstairs, laughing and giggling about something Mike didn't want to know about.

Mike walked past the guest room, the one occupied by his sister and his friends. He still didn't understand the logic of three girls getting a room and five boys having to cram into the one next to it. He lingered near the doorway, and after a few seconds of blank staring, he realized that the window was letting hot air blow in, the curtains shifting in the wind.

What idiot decided to leave a window open in this heat? Mike wondered as he stepped into the room. He pulled aside the curtains to close it, finding his view perfectly overlooking the backyard, where Bill and Will had apparently joined the group, running around and playing tag. He stared out the open window, unable to drag his eyes away from the smiling boy, golden brown hair whipping around his face.

He was jerked out of his trance as the door behind him slammed shut. He jumped, turning around as the sound of the lock clicked into place. He ran over, trying to unlock it, shaking the knob and banging on the door, but it wouldn't budge.

“Help!” he called out. “*Help!*” He ran over to the window, still open, hot air blowing his hair back. He called out for help a couple more times. The kids down below were still running, still picking flowers and laying on hammocks and laughing like there wasn't a care in the world.

"They won't hear you, you know." The voice came from behind him, and Mike looked around the room. He didn't find anyone, his eyebrows furrowed in confusion. The only other thing in the room was a large tank, a snake sitting peacefully under the heat lamp.

He shuddered. Mike *hated* snakes. He remembered back in sixth grade, when his class went to a zoo, and the kids were allowed to pet and hold some snakes. Mike was pretty sure he almost passed out that day.

But he still didn't know who was talking.

"Who-who's there?" he called out weakly. His eyes were still roving around the room, narrowing a look at the closet. *They're hiding in there, I bet. Ready to pounce on me and gut me.* He backed up, ready to jump out of the window in case an axe-murderer jumped out of nowhere, but he was surprised when he found the window closed. And bolted to the frame. "What the hell?"

"Can't run away now, can you?" the voice called again. Mike was mortified as he realized that it was the snake that was talking, its head raised as it stared at Mike with strangely human-like eyes.

He blinked, and, as if it appeared out of thin air, a perfectly round red balloon floated in midair, perfectly still. Unnaturally still. Mike tried more to blend in with the wall.

"Oh, I thought you loved balloons," the snake quirked its head. "You can't have a birthday without them." The balloon shifted, as if on a conveyor belt. It floated along, not bobbing, not shifting; the string didn't even move, stiff like a pole. "Oh, but your birthday's soon, isn't it?" the snake inquired. "Here's an early birthday gift."

The balloon floated until it was six inches from Mike's nose. "Go on," the snake pressed. Mike gulped, and he felt his hand move to touch the balloon, and he couldn't pull back his arm if he wanted to. It was like the balloon had *him* on a string, pulling him unwillingly along.

"*Take. It.*" Mike's finger connected with the balloon. And it popped.

Mike half expected it, but what he did *not* expect was the black ink

that came from it, soaking his clothes and getting on the beds, splattering on the walls and staining the carpet. The window had shattered and, with a mortified certainty, Mike realized the snake's enclosure had fragmented as well.

Mike didn't know what kind of snake it was, as he was never interested in learning about them, but this one had spots on its back, and he could see them as it slithered its way toward him, and Mike, petrified, could only scream, and he didn't know how he ended up curled up on the ground, surrounded by broken glass. It unhinged its jaw and showed long, thin fangs, and Mike knew *this is how I go. Not to a mind-flaying monster from another dimension, no, I, Mike Wheeler, is going to die from a three foot long snake that can pop balloons and speak and—*

The door burst open, Nancy running in along with half of the house.

"What are you *doing*, Mike?" she asked, resting her hands on her hips in a scary imitation of their mother. "You're not allowed in the girls' room, remember?"

Mike could only stare, wide-eyed and dripping ink, surrounded by broken glass."Th-the i-i-ink, and the suh-suh-snuh—"

"Ink?" Nancy looked around, as if she was unable to see an entire wall and her younger brother covered in the dripping liquid, unable to smell the intoxicating, sickly-sweet fumes. *Maybe she can't*, Mike thought. *Maybe there is no ink, or balloon, or snake. Maybe I've finally gone off the deep end.*

But Dustin's open-mouthedness, Ben's raised eyebrows (he seemed to have arrived without Mike's notice), and Will's reproachful stare said different.

"And you let the snake out of the terrarium!" Nancy rushed over and, before Mike could say *that thing's gonna kill you!*, she picked it up and placed it back in its broken tank, where it promptly fell asleep. "Really Mike, we shouldn't have to treat you like a little kid. Why were you even screaming anyway? To scare the shit out of us all?" Her eyebrows were raised, and her lips were set into that pout that she did when she was really pissed.

Mike was left stuttering as she left the room with a “And come outside, Mike. You need to get some sun.”

As soon as she left, a flood of people filled the room, all of Mike’s friends along with Bill and Ben, asking a million questions at once.

“Why did you break the window?”

“Why couldn’t Nancy see that?”

“Are you okay?”

“Wh-why is there i-i-ink on the wall? A-and on *you*?”

“Did you fucking hurt Martha? She’s sensitive, you asshole!”

“Mike, can you hear me? How many fingers am I holding up? Mike, *how many fingers?*”

Mike was still whispering about *ink* and *balloons*, staring at his leg, where the snake was about to sink its venom-filled fangs into his skin. He half expect to find two perfect puncture holes, feel himself fade away from life as the venom gripped his heart.

But no. He was alive, perfectly fine except for the bits of glass in his arms and the drying ink covering his freckles.

And maybe it was the overstimulation of all of his friends yelling at him, or maybe it was the ink fumes getting to his head, or maybe it was the entire weirdness of the day, but after whispering “snake” one more time, he promptly passed out.

...

After the hectic day he had, Will was ready to go to bed right when the sun went down.

Mike, who was woken up soon after passing out with a slap to the face (courtesy of Max), was already asleep, snoring lightly into his pillow. He had taken a shower, although Will could still find spots of ink on his skin, a dark contrast to his pale complexion.

He still seemed slightly shaken up, but he didn't elaborate on what happened except for the words "ink," "balloon," and "snake." Will guessed the best medicine for his nerves would be sleep.

Will himself settled down to sleep, closing his eyes and snuggling in deeper underneath his pile of blankets.

Will always loved these kinds of dreams. Or maybe he hated them. He hadn't decided yet.

He was standing in an empty room, or maybe room wasn't the right word. It was like a wide expanse of pure nothing, black and forever. The floor had a thin covering of water on it, but his sock-clad feet were never wet.

He liked the peacefulness of it, his hectic life calming down in dreamland. He liked the fact that he could see himself, as if a spotlight was on him and he couldn't see it. He liked the blackness, the water on the ground, and the cool air twisting around him like a snake, the air still, but moving, wrapping around him in a suffocating grasp. He liked this.

What he hated, very, very much, was when things would join him in this nothingness. Sometimes it would be Castle Byers, but the bluish tinge to it and the vines twisting and curling into it let him know it wasn't the one in his backyard. No, this version was collapsed and torn apart, as if a giant monster had ripped it to shreds in its hunt for a small boy.

This was one of those nights with things in this void.

It started out pretty normal, with his feet planted firmly on the ground as he stood alone, in nowhere. And he looked around, finding nothing. And then there was something.

A person, standing still, shaking and *wait, were they crying?* He stepped closer to the person, finding a familiar face underneath a sheet of auburn hair.

"Bill?" Will asked. He kept crying, looking down at something Will couldn't see. He was wearing pajamas, and looking as if he had just

woken up, but the tear tracks down his face looked years old.

“Bill, are you okay?” Still no answer. “Bill, can you hear me?”

He opened his mouth to speak, staring at the Lego turtle in his hands. “I miss-s you s-s-so much...”

“Bill, what are you—” Will was startled out of his sentence, and his dream altogether, when the sound of a bloodcurdling scream filled the house.

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey, as you may have already guessed, the incidents that happen in the movie are very out of order compared to this. Do not worry. It's supposed to be that way. (And yes, Richie named the snake Martha.)